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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [EAID](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL CHIEF OF STAFF RAMIZ MEHDIYEV LAYS
DOWN TOUGH LINE ON DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

REF: A. BAKU 306
[1](#)B. BAKU 231
[1](#)C. BAKU 354

Classified By: Ambasssador Anne E. Derse per 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In an April 8 meeting with the Ambassador, Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev, echoing President Aliyev (ref a), laid down a tough new line on democracy assistance. He said that the National Democratic Institute must conduct joint training for pro-government and opposition parties; otherwise "there is suspicion in our hearts." In response to the Ambassador's concerns about the last-minute cancellation of a judicial training program, Mehdiyev suggested that the U.S. should send a description of proposed training and the GOAJ would select the nominees. The Ambassador responded that assistance programs must be implemented in a spirit of partnership without one side dictating the terms.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary continued: Mehdiyev asserted that some publications and NGOS - with assistance from the U.S. Government - sought to destabilize Azerbaijan, pointing as evidence to assistance to NGOs and one newspaper run by individuals with connections to opposition parties. The Ambassador responded that U.S. assistance supports democratic institutions and processes, not particular parties or politicians. She urged Mehdiyev to provide details on alleged U.S. support for the opposition so that we can jointly review these concerns, and also pressed Mehdiyev to take concrete measures to improve Azerbaijan's poor media environment. Mehdiyev promised to provide information on alleged U.S. support for the opposition and to brief the Embassy on the GOAJ's election action plan, adding "then we'll see what kind of assistance we need." Mehdiyev's new and harder line, clearly implying that the GOAJ would accept democracy and governance assistance only on its own terms, stands in marked contrast to his earlier assurances that the GOAJ welcomed U.S. election assistance. End summary.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Ambassador met for two hours with Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev on April 8 to review democracy, human rights and assistance issues. They also discussed Nagorno Karabakh (septel). Mehdiyev was accompanied by Presidential Advisors Fuad Alasgarov, Shahin Aliyev, Ali Hasanov, and Elnur Aslanov. The Ambassador was accompanied by the DCM and Pol/Econ Chief (notetaker).

NDI: "SUSPICION IN OUR HEARTS"

[1](#)4. (C) The Ambassador noted that she had tried to reach Mehdiyev a few weeks ago regarding problems that the National Democratic Institute (NDI) had experienced while trying to conduct political party training in Ganja. While the problem

had been solved, she referred to her and EUR DAS Bryza's previous discussions with Mehdiyev regarding U.S. democracy

assistance programs (ref b) and their agreement to raise issues directly. She emphasized that the U.S. seeks to support Azerbaijan's own democratic goals in a spirit of cooperation and transparency. She repeated the offer that Mehdiyev contact her directly if the GOAJ has problems or questions concerning U.S. democracy programs, and thanked him for the Ganja ExCom's assistance in resolving NDI's problems.

15. (C) Mehdiyev responded that the GOAJ would not allow NDI's activities to be stopped, and would continue to cooperate with NDI on its ongoing programs. However, when GOAJ officials had met previously with NDI, they had asked NDI to organize political party trainings on a combined basis, and not to conduct separate trainings for the opposition and ruling parties. Mehdiyev stressed that Azerbaijan seeks to promote the development of democratic principles. "If NDI wants to work with us," he asked, "why do they organize separate trainings? If there is joint training, all suspicions will be terminated." Mehdiyev said that NDI had "derailed" from its previous agreement with the GOAJ to conduct joint training and, for this reason, "there is suspicion in our hearts." Commenting that the International Republican Institute operates on the principle of joint training programs, Mehdiyev said that the GOAJ is ready to support NDI and IRI activities "on the basis of previously agreed principles." (Note: IRI later confirmed that it, too, conducts separate training when appropriate.) The Ambassador responded that the U.S. Government stresses with all of its implementing partners the need to be nonpartisan, transparent and balanced in their activities, and encouraged Mehdiyev to meet with NDI's new Washington-based leadership.

PUBLIC ORDER MANAGEMENT TRAINING

16. (C) The Ambassador noted that the Ministry of Internal Affairs had expressed concerns regarding U.S. human rights vetting requirements for public order management training designed to help bring Azerbaijan into compliance with international human rights standards. Mehdiyev said he was aware of the issue and had instructed Minister of Internal Affairs Ramil Usubov to reach a solution with the Ambassador. "We don't have any objections" to the proposed training, Mehdiyev said. (Comment: In an April 10 meeting with the Ambassador, Minister Usubov agreed to conduct the human rights vetting for senior staff in full compliance with the U.S. Leahy Amendment.)

GOAJ APPROVAL FOR USG TRAINING PARTICIPANTS?

17. (C) The Ambassador also noted that the GOAJ had recently canceled the participation of four judges in a USG training program designed to support Azerbaijan's judicial reform program. She noted that the last-minute cancellation resulted in an unnecessary waste of scarce U.S. assistance funds. Presidential Legal Advisor Fuad Alasgarov responded that the Ministry of Justice had briefed him on the issue and that, in accordance with Azerbaijani law, judges can participate in international programs only with the authorization of the Judicial-Legal Council. He also noted that the judges in question had a heavy court docket and could not be spared at this particular time. The Ambassador responded that at least one of the judges had in fact been proposed for U.S. training by the Judicial-Legal Council, a point that Alasgarov disputed. Alasgarov stated that "according to the law, we, not the U.S. Embassy, should choose these judges" for training; the Ambassador responded firmly that the U.S. Embassy reserves the right to select participants for its training programs.

18. (C) Mehdiyev noted that the GOAJ must follow its legislation regarding the implementation of bilateral assistance programs and suggested that Alasgarov meet with

the U.S. Embassy to sort out the details. The Ambassador noted that last-minute cancellations had occurred in a broad range of USG training programs and were not limited to the judicial sphere. She said she would send Mehdiyev a letter outlining the problems. Mehdiyev responded that the two sides need to define the principles for cooperation, suggesting that the U.S. could inform specific ministries in writing of upcoming training programs and defining the types of persons they seek to send. The Ambassador noted that the U.S. must implement its bilateral assistance programs in accordance with its own regulations, and agreed that the DCM and Mehdiyev's colleagues should continue the discussion.

ATTACK ON AZADLIQ JOURNALIST

¶9. (C) Stressing that the United States is a strong friend of Azerbaijan, the Ambassador told Mehdiyev that the U.S. remains deeply concerned about the negative trend in Azerbaijan's media environment, which continues to spiral downward. She said that she was sharing this message in a spirit of mutual respect, with great concern that negative events with respect to the media in Azerbaijan are having a serious impact on Azerbaijan's image and could affect the relationship with the U.S. The apparent campaign to vilify Azadliq newspaper journalist Agil Khalil (ref c) is more in keeping with Azerbaijan's Soviet past than its democratic future. This perception of a campaign against Khalil is very harmful, she said, and whoever is handling the case is not handling it well from the perspective of our ability to work constructively. As a friend of Azerbaijan, the Ambassador said that the time has come for an important signal from the GOAJ to underscore its commitment to promoting a free and independent press as an instrument of democracy, followed by concrete steps to carry out that commitment. Azerbaijan needs strong leadership on this issue.

¶10. (C) Mehdiyev thanked the Ambassador for her message, and said that President Aliyev had "very seriously" instructed law enforcement authorities to conduct a "serious and credible" investigation of the February and March attacks on Khalil. He said that the Prosecutor General had finalized some elements of the investigation and urged the Ambassador to meet with the Prosecutor General so he could brief her on "new developments" in the case; he also commented that there had been extensive television coverage of the case.

¶11. (C) Mehdiyev said the GOAJ had no interest in seeing its media problems in the international limelight, as that "undermines the transparent, good activities of the government." An "objective analysis" shows that these media problems are in fact "aimed at violating stability in Azerbaijan." The government desires democratic development, Mehdiyev said, but there are "internal forces interested in violating stability." He alleged that the "radical destructive forces that call themselves the opposition create NGOs and use the media to damage the image of the Azerbaijani government."

U.S. FUNDING THE OPPOSITION?

¶12. (C) Echoing President Aliyev, Mehdiyev alleged that that some NGOs, with financial assistance from USAID, serve the interests of opposition political parties, pointing to specific U.S. assistance projects that "contradict Azerbaijan's stability." For example, Hikmet Hajizade, a member of the Musavat Council and a "tough critic of the Azerbaijani Government" received USD 40,000 from USAID while his son Adnan Hajizade who heads Musavat's youth movement had received USD 15,000 in a USG assistance project. "It is clear that these persons use U.S. funds to organize activities against the government," Mehdiyev asserted. He added that the U.S. had provided USD 42,000 to opposition "Gun Seher" newspaper which is "full of lies about the dignity of the President." (Note: These grants were provided by the National Endowment for Democracy.)

¶13. (C) Mehdiyev said the GOAJ was "analyzing all steps taken by these organizations," and expressed his dismay that the U.S. was "funding the opposition" even as it was working with the GOAJ to promote stability in Azerbaijan. "The opposition should be developed using its own resources," he said. The National Endowment for Democracy and the Soros Foundation were financing opposition parties through "various routes." "I understand that a democratic society must have opposition. But if the opposition is aided by external forces, these external forces participate in raising forces against the state." Mehdiyev continued that he didn't want to hide the fact that the GOAJ is aware that advice and recommendations are given in meetings between international organizations and the opposition. "We're informed," he said. And if foreign financing to the opposition continues, the Azerbaijani elections will look like the Armenian elections. Today, public support for the opposition is very weak, yet foreign support for the opposition encourages the opposition to be more aggressive. "The state will have to defend itself," Mehdiyev warned.

WE'LL LET YOU KNOW WHAT ASSISTANCE WE NEED

¶14. (C) Mehdiyev stated that the GOAJ wants free and fair elections and that the October presidential election will be the most transparent, fair and democratic in the South Caucasus. "We have to be very attentive in our relations with democratic forces." Azerbaijan has more than 3,500 NGOs and the vast majority of them are neutral. Yet the U.S. pushes aside neutral and pro-governmental NGOs and provides financial support to NGOs that oppose the government. "We have a list of NGOs that created radical political parties" and "if U.S. finances go to these NGOs, they go to these political parties." Mehdiyev noted that the GOAJ had developed its own action plan for the October election and would brief the U.S. on this plan. Then, he said, "we will see in which areas we need assistance."

THE AMBASSADOR PUSHES BACK

¶15. (C) The Ambassador responded that U.S. assistance supports democratic institutions and process, not individual parties or candidates. The U.S. shares Azerbaijan's goal of holding free and fair elections and its bilateral assistance is designed to help Azerbaijan reach that goal. The 2008 presidential election is a strategic opportunity to advance Azerbaijan's democratic objectives and the Ambassador urged Mehdiyev to take full advantage of that opportunity. She repeated EUR A/S Fried's statement that the U.S. is not promoting a revolution in Azerbaijan, and suggested that Mehdiyev's advisors and the DCM review the GOAJ's allegations in detail. Mehdiyev agreed. (As of April 11, Mehdiyev's office has provided no information.)

¶16. (C) Looking the Ambassador straight in the eye, Mehdiyev asked whether she trusts Ilham Aliyev as a modern and truly democratic man. Looking him straight back in the eye, the Ambassador responded that based on what Ilham Aliyev has said

about Azerbaijan's policies - and specifically its democratic commitments to the OSCE, the COE, the EU and NATO - that would be her conclusion. But notwithstanding Azerbaijan's policy statements and commitments, there is a gap growing between the President's stated vision for Azerbaijan and reality on the ground. Mehdiyev responded that that Aliyev is a modern, democratic man and the creation of a democratic society is at the top of his agenda. Mehdiyev acknowledged that there are "shortcoming in this pathway" but maintained they are "not our policy." Mehdiyev said the GOAJ does not seek to raise tensions with international organizations; instead, there are "forces that try to violate stability." He again alleged that "foreign assistance" was encouraging the opposition to be more radical and seek to "impose themselves."

¶17. (C) The Ambassador stressed stability is essential to U.S. interests in Azerbaijan. However, true stability can come only through long-term democratic reform, as there is a greater opportunity for outside forces to exploit repressive situations. Moreover, it is difficult for the modern, European opposition that President Aliyev has said he desires to emerge when there is no freedom of assembly or association, and when alternate ideas cannot be presented on television or radio. The Ambassador said the U.S. hopes that changes will come in the new law on freedom of assembly and improvements in Azerbaijan's media environment. Otherwise, alternate voices will be forced underground and could become extremist.

AZERBAIJAN'S "SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES"

¶18. (C) Mehdiyev argued that this view is correct in theory but that every state has its own specific circumstances. Azerbaijan is a small country and one protest or one negative article about the president could have enormous repercussions. Azerbaijan also has a very difficult geopolitical position, with pressure from Russia and Iran, including a "fifth column" from Iran that will "triumph if we turn our backs." "If we allow a great deal of liberty, Azerbaijan will be out of control," Mehdiyev said. "There will be chaos if we push for full democracy just to make international organizations happy." Mehdiyev said the U.S. should focus on future trends rather than "small shortcomings." If we work together, we can produce tangible results, he added.

¶19. (C) The Ambassador responded that the U.S. doesn't discount Azerbaijan's difficult geopolitical situation or dispute the fact that it is a young country. The U.S. wants to see Azerbaijan develop as a stable, democratic country, and our assistance is consistent with this goal. There is a gap however, between Azerbaijan's strategic vision and the realities on the ground, and an urgent need for the GOAJ to address this with concrete measures. The U.S. will continue to engage intensively with Azerbaijan on political and economic reforms to support Azerbaijan's development. She pledged that the U.S. would continue to do so in full transparency. Mehdiyev agreed to continue regular meetings on this subject.

COMMENT

¶20. (C) Mehdiyev's new and harder line - echoing President Aliyev and clearly implying that the GOAJ will accept democracy and governance assistance only on its own terms - stands in marked contrast to his earlier assurances that the GOAJ welcomed U.S. election assistance. Mehdiyev's change of tone is in keeping with Azerbaijan's overall growing sense of confidence, and its enduring perception that it is treated more harshly than its neighbors with respect to its record on democracy and human rights. It also is linked to the GOAJ's frustration with its key Western partners following the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs' "no" vote on Azerbaijan's UNGA resolution on Nagorno Karabakh and the occupied territories (septel), and concern with what it perceives to be double standards in the international community's assessment of recent elections in neighboring Georgia and Armenia. We expect the GOAJ's stance on USG election-related assistance and activities to harden in the coming months.

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